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ABSTRACT

In 1992, Alamogordo Branch Community College (ABCC), a branch campus of New Mexico State University, developed and implemented the Institutional Assessment and Strategic Planning (IASP) process, an integrated process designed to assess both student academic achievement and institutional effectiveness. Each year, the IASP process begins when individual faculty members evaluate their assessment activities for all courses and complete reports about their assessment efforts. Next, instructors in all academic disciplines discuss their assessment activities at discipline-specific focus group meetings. Other activities include focus groups among each of the four academic divisions, focus retreats for faculty and for student services personnel, focus group meetings in each student service program, and Institutional/Instructional Support focus groups and retreats. At focus group meetings, participants complete forms listing strengths and concerns in their areas, and develop action plans. These forms and action plans are forwarded to the IASP Committee and used as support documentation for the strategic planning process. The IASP Committee, with 10 members appointed by the Provost, develops a set of institutional issues. The issues are ranked, and institutional actions are developed to address each issue. Subsequently, an institutional plan is developed and presented to the college community. Institutional research is important to the IASP process, including internal and external environmental scans and student tracking systems. The IASP process is successful at ABCC because it provides an opportunity for everyone on campus to be heard. (PAA)

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Institutional Assessment, Planning, and Institutional Change: An Integrated Institutional Assessment and Strategic Planning Process for Community Colleges

Abstract

A small community college created and implemented an integrated Institutional Assessment and Strategic Planning process. The process has successfully been used to assess student academic achievement and institutional effectiveness. The process is a simple, flexible, bottom-up, faculty and staff-driven process that has garnered tremendous faculty and staff support. A series of focus group meetings are used to identify program strengths and concerns. These concerns serve as the basis of program action plans. These action plans lead to development of the college's strategic plan.

Introduction

Alamogordo Branch Community College, a branch of New Mexico State University, developed and implemented an Institutional Assessment and Strategic Planning (IASP) process in 1992. The integrated process was designed to assess student academic achievement and institutional effectiveness and plan for future improvements (see Figure 1). It was also hoped that the process would comply with North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) assessment and planning criteria and in fact lead to institutional change. A NCA accreditation site visit during March 1993 resulted in this process being evaluated as an institutional strength.

Foundation for Development of the IASP Process

The development of an institutional assessment process was started in 1990. An assessment committee was created as part of the NCA self-study process in anticipation of an accreditation visit to be held in March 1993. As late as March 1992, it was not clear what kind of process was necessary to fulfill the evolving and somewhat ambiguous requirements that were being recommended by NCA as it solidified its position on assessment. After a lengthy literature review, no models of successful plans were found that would meet our specific needs. The literature provided plenty of advice about how assessment plans would work in theory, but very little about how they should actually operate. The situation was still more confused because it was not clear that the college could implement a process that would really work and would also comply with NCA requirements.

A Coordinator of Assessment was hired in March 1992 to build on the work completed by the NCA Self-Study Assessment committee. The committee had produced a final product that laid a solid foundation for the assessment process (Himebrook, Twomey, Beck, Flores, & Elliott, 1992). The committee generally concluded that assessment of institutional effectiveness and student academic achievement was necessary, that the process needed to be faculty-owned, and that it should be a "bottom-up" process. As late as March 1992, committee members suggested that they had gone as far as they could without additional guidance from the college leadership. The committee had accumulated extensive background material about

assessment. These data and the committee's report were the foundation on which the assessment component of the IASP process was built.

A second committee had been created to develop a strategic planning process. This committee, after considerable research and effort, developed the basic planning structure that later became the strategic planning and institutional research components of the IASP process.

Need for an Integrated Assessment and Strategic Planning Process

It became apparent, based on a review of assessment research, that the assessment process and the strategic planning process could and should be integrated. There was a clear realization that the processes had similar goals. The most important was the improvement of our institution's ability to educate and serve students. This integrated approach quickly got the full support of the college leadership for a variety reasons. An integrated process minimizes the amount of time required of faculty and staff. It also eliminates duplication that surely would have been the result of separate assessment and planning processes.

Development of the IASP Process

One important factor that affected the development of the IASP process was the relatively small size of the institution. NMSU-A is a small branch community college with a student headcount of approximately 2000 students, 40 full-time faculty, 80 part-time faculty, and 70 staff. Obviously whatever we did had to be done by our current personnel and within prevailing budget constraints. No additional

personnel would be hired to "do" assessment and planning. This realization and the recommendation of the Self-Study Assessment committee that the process should be faculty-driven led the team to create a simple, flexible, form-driven process.

While the assessment of student academic achievement is essentially a faculty operation, the assessment of institutional effectiveness is much broader. Therefore, although the process relies heavily on faculty involvement, it must also involve all other college personnel. While the IASP process is a continuous process, it cycles naturally through an academic year. New faculty and staff are trained to use the IASP process in the fall. An instructional handbook was developed to guide campus personnel through the IASP process (Lillibridge, Vallejos, & Leas, 1992).

Description of the IASP process

Faculty

The first step of the IASP process begins as faculty members are encouraged to self assess their teaching and assess their students' learning (see Figure 2). They are trained and encouraged to use classroom assessment techniques advocated by K. Patricia Cross and Thomas A. Angelo (1988). Each year, the IASP process begins when individual faculty members evaluate their assessment activities for all their courses and complete reports about specific assessment projects. These assessment projects are created and completed by faculty members. They apply the results of their own classroom research directly to their own teaching and learning processes, leading to

improvements in their teaching and in student learning. Collaborative projects are encouraged and technical support is available from the Office of Institutional Research. These assessment projects are the primary method by which the assessment of student academic achievement is realized. Select assessment project reports are annually compiled, edited, and published by the Associate Provost for Instruction (Leas, 1993).

Focus Group Interview

NMSU-A adopted the focus group interview as an essential element of the IASP process. It is an approach that was developed and used by marketing and advertising agencies to gather information (Buckmaster, 1985; Burdick, 1986; Bers, 1987). Some colleges have adapted this technique for assessment and research purposes (Northern Virginia Community College, 1987; Brodigan, 1992).

Academic Discipline Focus Group Meetings

The second step of the IASP process commences when instructors in all academic disciplines discuss their assessment activities and projects at discipline specific focus group meetings. There are two objectives for these meetings. The first is to decide activities that the academic discipline does well. This is done by completing appropriate forms that list and support up to five of its perceived strengths. The second is to document operations or factors that could be improved. Again, this is done by completing appropriate forms that list up to five perceived concerns and provides suggestions for possible activities that could improve or alleviate these concerns. Members of the academic

discipline are encouraged to act immediately to mitigate a concern if a solution is found during this meeting and if the solution can be achieved within the academic discipline's area of control. Completed forms are forwarded to the academic division head after the meeting.

Academic Division Focus Group Meetings

NMSU-A has four academic divisions. Each has a division head who reports to the Associate Provost for Instruction. Each division head facilitates a focus group meeting of all faculty members in the academic division. There are three objectives for this meeting. The first two objectives are similar to those produced by each of the academic disciplines; faculty members define five division strengths, and up to five division concerns are enumerated. The third objective is for each academic division to prepare a division action plan. Each action plan consists of up to ten division improvement objectives and includes possible actions that are intended to achieve each improvement objective. These plans have two purposes: 1) to serve as the division's strategic plan for future years, and 2) to provide input for the next step of the IASP process -- the Associate Provost for Instruction Focus Retreat.

Associate Provost for Instruction Focus Retreat

The third step of the IASP process is a focus retreat sponsored by and facilitated by the Associate Provost for Instruction. This focus group consists of all four academic division heads, all senior faculty, and all regular and part-time faculty who wish to participate. Like the academic division focus meetings, there are three objectives. The group

identifies for the college's instructional milieu up to ten strengths, up to ten concerns, and an action plan for Instruction. The action plan again serves two functions: first to guide Instruction during the next and future years, and second to provide input to the IASP committee to help in the preparation of the IASP Final Plan.

Other College Organizational Units

The community college is divided into three functional organizational units for IASP purposes. Two of these units already existed, Instruction and Student Services. The third unit is an amalgamation of all remaining organization units. For IASP purposes, this unit is called Instructional/Institutional Support. While assessment activities within Instruction are predominantly centered on teaching and student learning, other NMSU-A personnel provide either direct student services, instruction support services, or institutional support services. Assessment in these domains appropriately is concentrated on functional or institutional effectiveness. The IASP process for Student Services and Instructional/Institutional Support follows the model designed for Instruction (see Figure 3). It is in these domains that the flexibility of IASP process is most evident.

Student Services Focus Group Meetings

The Assistant Provost of Student Services is responsible for student services. These services include student counseling, career counseling, admissions, student records, financial aid, and the student union. Focus group meetings are held in each student service program. These meetings are held during the same period as the academic

division focus meetings, and the Institutional/Instruction programs focus meetings. For each program, up to five program strengths and up to five program concerns are enumerated. Additionally, each program prepares an action plan. Up to ten program improvement objectives are stated and actions intended to achieve each improvement objective are developed. Like each academic division action plan, each program action plan has two purposes. The first is to serve as the program's plan for the next year and future years. Second, the action plan and the strengths and concerns are used to provide input for the next step of the IASP process -- the Assistant Provost for Student Services Focus Retreat.

Assistant Provost for Student Services Focus Retreat

The Assistant Provost for Student Services Focus Retreat is a focus group that is facilitated by the Associate Provost for Student Services and consists of all student services program heads, all professional staff, and classified staff who wish to participate. There are three objectives. The group is to identify up to ten strengths, up to ten concerns, and an action plan for Student Services. The action plan again serves two functions, first, to guide Student Services during the next and future years; and second, to provide input to the IASP committee to assist in the preparation of the IASP Final Plan.

Institutional/Instructional Support Focus Group Meetings

The Institutional/Instructional Support unit was organized only for IASP purposes. It is chaired by the Assistant Provost for Business Affairs. This is a loose group of programs that includes: the Learning Resource Center, the Business Office, the Bookstore, the Duplicating

Center, the Adult Basic Education program, the Small Business Development Center, the Physical Plant, and the Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Planning. These programs each enumerate strengths, concerns, and action plans like those prepared by the programs in Student Services and academic divisions.

Institutional/Instructional Support Focus Retreat

The Assistant Provost for Business Affairs facilitates a focus retreat for all program heads and coordinators included in the Institutional/Instructional Support unit. The completed forms for this retreat, like the output of the retreats for Instruction and Student Services are forwarded to the IASP committee.

IASP Committee Activities

The IASP committee consists of ten members appointed by the Provost. The Associate Provost for Instruction is the chair. The Coordinator of Assessment serves in the triple role of committee member, IASP plan editor, and IASP meeting facilitator.

Prior to the initial meeting of the IASP Committee, the IASP plan editor reviewed and analyzed the strengths, concerns, and action plans from every division and program, as well as Instruction, Student Services, and Institutional/Instructional Support. A series of reports was synthesized to serve as support documentation for the strategic planning process. These reports included: a list of vital campus issues that either affected, would affect, or might affect the institution; new and expanded campus programs and processes that were suggested during the IASP process; a list of personnel related requests and

suggestions; new equipment requests; campus space utilization concerns; and campus computing concerns. These reports, entitled *IASP Outcomes*, served as the support documentation for the first IASP committee meeting. The objective of the first meeting was to determine and discuss the most significant institutional issues and suggest possible interventions or actions that the institution could implement.

The first IASP committee meeting resulted in the development of nine institutional issues. A structured summary of each issue was prepared. Each summary included: the background and possible institutional consequences of each issue, and possible options to deal with each issue. Possible options to deal with these issues were based on committee discussion or came from various action plans that were developed earlier in the IASP process. Following the committee's first meeting, all written institutional issues were distributed to each IASP committee member for review and comment. Comments were received from the committee and modifications were made as appropriate.

The revised institutional issues were distributed to the committee before the second (final) IASP committee meeting. The goals of this meeting were threefold. First, agree on the significant institutional issues; second, determine what actions we would implement to address each issue; and third, set the priority of each issue in terms of its significance to the college. It was decided, during this meeting, to combine some issues. The final number of issues was seven. The issues were ranked and institutional actions were determined to address each issue.

Following the meeting, appropriate changes were made, and proposed institutional issues were again distributed to committee members for review and comment. If the comments that were received had required significant changes, an additional IASP committee meeting would have been necessary, however, the changes suggested were minor. The IASP committee completed its work when it forwarded the draft final plan to the academic and administrative councils. Both councils approved the draft final plan. It was then forwarded to the Provost and prepared to be presented to the institution and community. The provost considered input and comments that came from the institution, students, or the community. A final institution plan is published and distributed. This strategic plan provides a road map for the next year and as long as three years into the future.

Institutional Research Component

An important component of the IASP process is institutional research. The process requires that the institution scan both its internal and external environments. Where possible we use existing data bases, when this is not possible, we have developed new student data bases. The institution surveyed students, staff, and the community as part of the self-study. This data was very raw and needed considerable analysis to make it more useful.

The Director of Institutional Research and the Carl Perkins Grant Data Coordinator have begun the development of a student tracking system. This basic system was necessary to study student academic achievement over time. Student cohorts were defined for first-time

students and first-time transfers beginning in Fall 1987. These students were tracked to determine how many dropped out, stopped out, continued, transferred to New Mexico State University, or graduated with either a certificate or a two-year degree. These data were further broken down by basic demographic categories. In this way, we can see how many students in the cohort categories completed their programs of study or transferred by Fall 1992.

The research team also developed and administered a survey of all students who registered for classes in Fall 1992 to better define the special populations and investigate student intent. Student opinion was also sought during a series of focus meetings that were held during the spring semester.

Reports produced by the Office of Institutional Research were distributed to all affected personnel. An institutional factbook was created to provide timely and relevant data and information.

The Selling of the IASP Process

Like many colleges, the creation of an IASP process was precipitated by external pressure. In the case of NMSU-A, this external pressure was provided by a pending regional accreditation. Although the accreditation process provided significant motivation, it was decided early-on to try to develop a process that was meaningful, useful, and flexible enough to incorporate a wide range of activities and ideas. It was decided to create a process that would be positive, productive, and inclusive. Toward this end, a simple process was needed. The

development team felt the main reasons assessment processes fail to function is that they are too complicated and unresponsive.

The campus embarked on a "Year of Assessment" during the initial year to increase faculty and staff awareness of the IASP process. The College Teaching committee planned and presented in-services about assessment in general, and about the IASP process specifically. In addition, the Associate Provost for Instruction and the Coordinator of Assessment made presentations about the IASP process to all interested groups and provided one-to-one guidance when requested.

How well did the IASP process work?

The IASP process worked better than hoped. The faculty and staff were resolved to the fact that they "had" to do it. We helped them along, by making the process as simple and straight forward as possible. Each participant was encouraged and assisted in the design and implementation of his or her own project and provided recognition for successful assessment projects. The process proved that assessment wasn't really new, that they were already doing much of it, and that they wouldn't have to spend significant time away from their prime tasks -- teaching and serving students. This was vital because we implemented the IASP process while we were completing the NCA self-study. Faculty and staff were "meetinged out". Nevertheless, they consented to "work" the process. Early in the process there was a realization that the process was not as onerous as many believed it would be and that it in fact (surprising to some), really worked. One fortunate early development was that real, usable solutions to concerns

were identified during the first stages of the process. Ideas were discovered and carried out on the spot. Successful faculty were quick to share their triumphs with colleagues! These occurrences showed the responsiveness of the process and contributed greatly to its acceptance.

Institutional Change

The IASP process exceeded our expectations in leading to institutional change. Several factors contributed to this outcome:

1. Faculty buy-in to the process led to professional development activities and faculty-instituted changes.

2. Concerns were identified at all functional levels of the institution; where possible, changes were implemented on the spot. Employees could see real changes taking place as a result of their participation in the process.

3. All employees were provided multiple opportunities to be heard, thus fostering an institutional sense of concern for the individual.

4. Frequent feedback to employees enabled everyone to stay in touch with the total process.

5. Proposed actions for the forthcoming year were tied directly to the college budget process.

6. The comprehensive set of seven institutional objectives provided the college with a comprehensive and realistic strategic plan of action.

Why did it work?

The IASP process worked because it provided an opportunity for everyone on campus to be heard. Each employee had a chance to put

his or her "two cents" in and be assured that someone would give it consideration. Not only could personnel discuss factors that concerned them, they had the opportunity to talk about the good things they were doing. They got a chance to "blow their own horn" and to receive feedback from others.

The process was also flexible, it seemed to work as well for faculty as it did for custodians. The process had enough structure to guide the faculty and staff but not too much to hamper creativity. Above all, the process was faculty- and staff-owned. They knew that the process wasn't going to work unless they were actively involved. It was very much a bottom-up process. Although we got into a formal assessment process because of external pressure, the process we developed was established to meet our unique needs.

Another factor that contributed to the success of the IASP process was the fact that the Coordinator of Assessment worked under the direction of the Associate Provost for Instruction. The coordinator also was a part-time faculty member. This may have helped to break down faculty resistance to the IASP process and contributed to near total faculty acceptance.

Conclusion

The IASP process was developed to fulfill a variety of institutional needs. The IASP process is designed to assess student academic achievement and institutional effectiveness. This assessment uses a focused evaluation of strengths and concerns and calls for the

development of action plans that led to improvement of all aspects of the institution.

It succeeded better than expected because it was readily accepted, supported, and utilized by faculty, staff, and administrators, and because it was a bottom-up process. The procedures are form-driven, uncomplicated, and easily adapted by all organizational units.

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Figure 1

INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS 1992

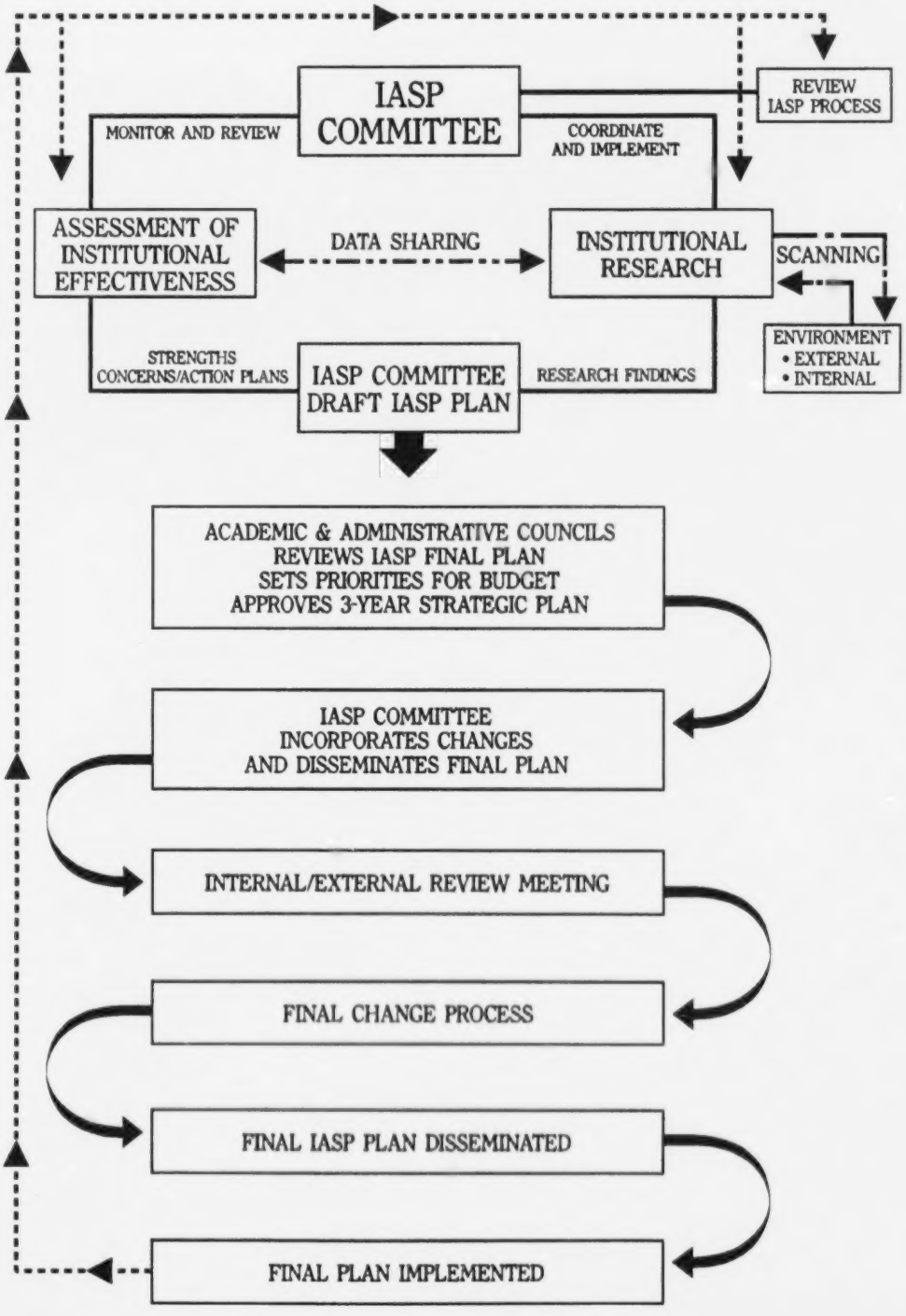
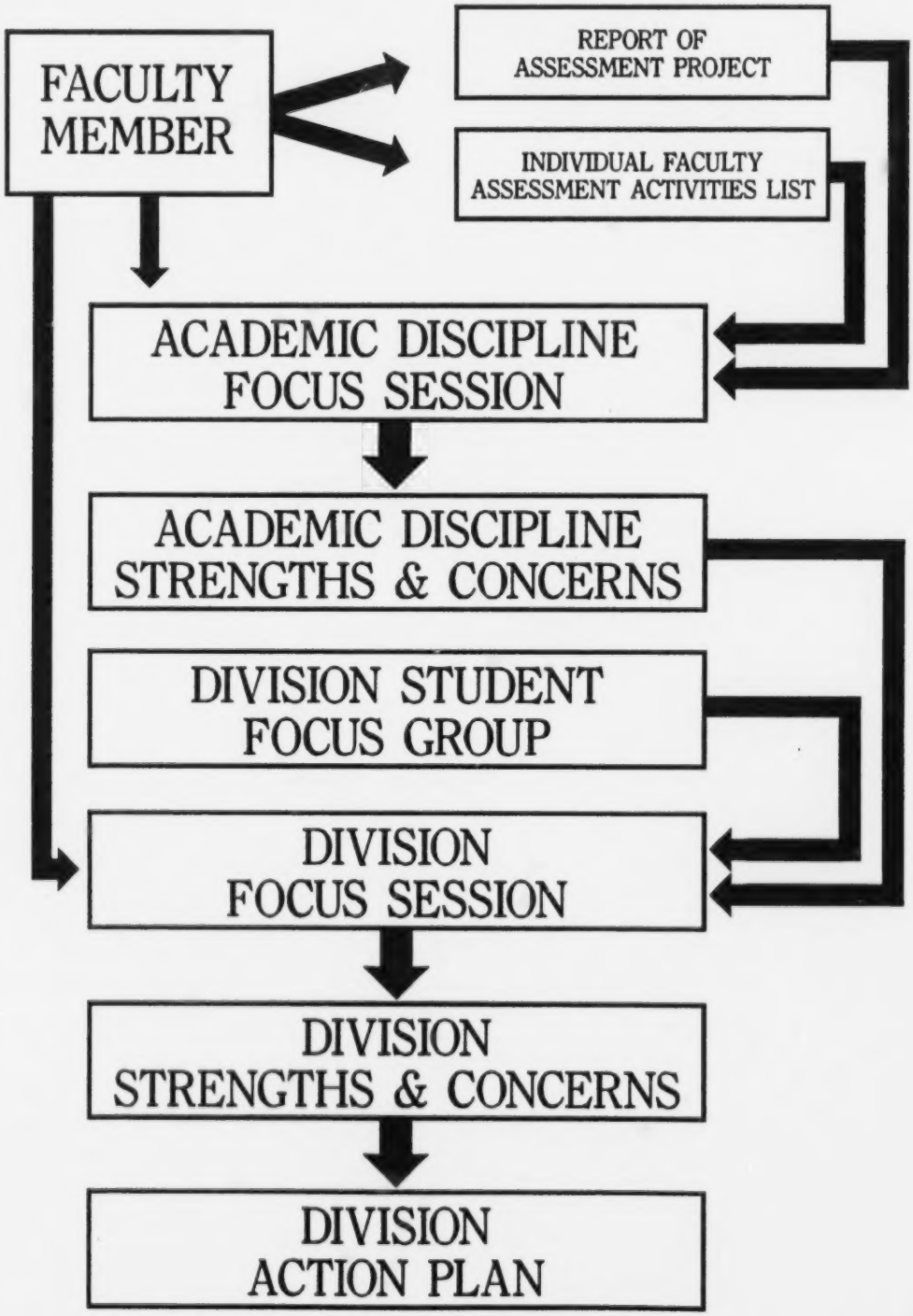


Figure 2

ASSESSMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS
- INSTRUCTION -



INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

ASSESSMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

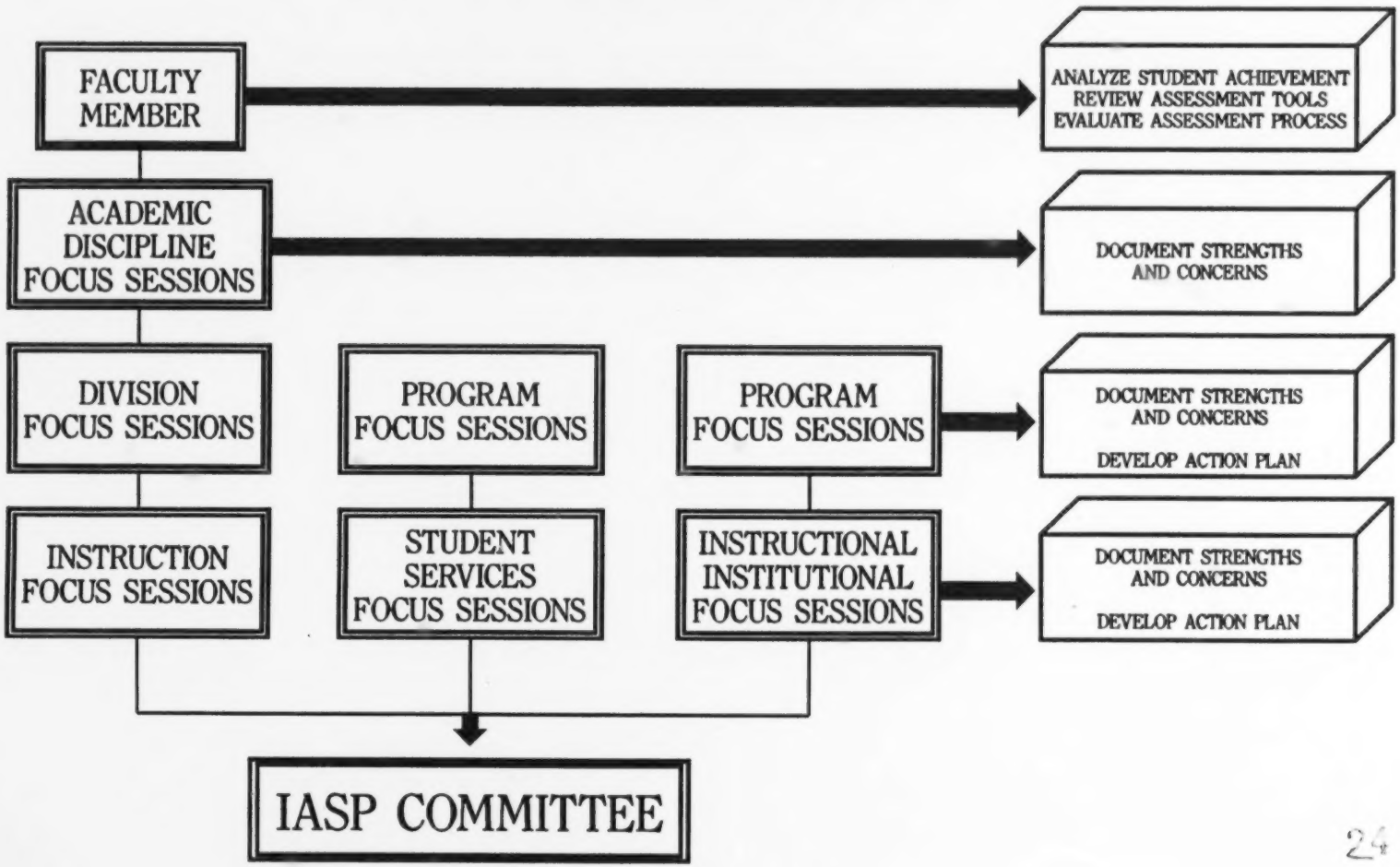


Figure 3